Tech for Good Panel

How are AI and other technological changes transforming the funding experience for both funders and applicants?

Our Panel

Joyce Borgs (JB)	CAST
Alex Ellis-White (AEW)	Leeds Community Foundation
Brett Riley-Tomlinson (BRT)	The Charity Hub

How is AI being used at Leeds Community Foundation?

(AEW) We began exploring how to use AI at the foundation during 2024 – I joined around a year ago and have brought more technical experience to the team. We made some valuable contacts through UKCF. We want to do it in a considered way and with eyes open – we are talking to our community groups as well, to get their views and expectations. We are taking time and learning from others.

How has it helped you be more engaged?

(BRT) We've been using AI for tender writing and we judge our applications before submitting them – most small charities can't afford a bid writer so AI is levelling the playing field.

What about the ethical / practical issues. Can you share your views on the challenges.

(JB) A lot of the risk is to do with bias as AI is trained on human data and sometimes hallucinates. We don't use AI as decisionmakers. Hallucinations account for 1-2% of the output currently – this is less than human mistakes but its hallucinations are just plain weird. Data privacy and security is also a concern – what is the data I put in used for. Is it used to train the AI? Does it go to a US server? Check your AI policy (or create one!) –it needs to support safe experimentation AND puts some of those safeguards in. We should be transparent about when and how we use AI – service users etc – as there's the risk of losing trust. It is an amazing tool but we should be open as to how we're using it.

(BRT) Regarding data privacy, you can create a copilot agent based on specific data with a reference point back to it – there's no ambiguity. If you use the enterprise version, the data is safe.

(AEW) Data quality is important. Part of our journey was switching Salesforce systems to affect a data cleanse. AI can be used to help quicken the task (summarising text for example) – but it's important not to lose the human element.

(JB) Start with the tools you are using already and make the most of what you have already.

How are frontline charities using AI and what difference is it making?

(BRT) Giving people access to frontline information – teams can ask the AI for immediate answers with references.

You can record the conversation and it will send you an email with the action points from the meeting which feeds back again into Microsoft. You've had one meeting – but it's recorded the meeting, emails the meeting notes to you and assigns actions to your planner/calendar. It enables you to work much more efficiently.

(AEW) The team noticed an increase in applications where you could see AI had been used (and badly) and there were a mixture of views in our team. It's great where English is not the first language, where written English is challenging – we have issued guidance on our website – we are looking for the answers to the questions so use with caution.

Debra Allcock Tyler

Chief Executive, Directory of Social Change – Keynote Speaker

Tropes we have - "There is no money" – and we just accept that. "The only people who can save the sector are the funders."

There is money – but it's about where its being spent. I've been in the sector for over 40 years and it's never been easy.

Politics is also getting everyone down. Every single thing we do in our sector is affected by politics – take the cancelling of USAID - the drip down from this affects people at a local level. Lots of charities we fund operate in international sector and are impacted by politics at a global and national level.

We are seeing increasing restrictions on human rights – globally and here as well – human rights are being eroded in the UK too. It's the science of unintended consequences. (e.g. new laws on protests)

We need to think about the backlash on women's rights, DEI / attacks on transgender as well. There are pockets of hope and progress as well (e.g. abortion law changes).

We can't underestimate the power of social media – people are turning away from the mainstream media. Most of us get our news online – but we must be creative and questioning.

The new labour government held a summit in January and spoke of partnership with civil society and charity and spoke warmly of the 3rd sector and its importance to their five missions. But I am now left with disappointment, even though several of the cabinet are formerly from the sector. Employers' NI increases have been so detrimental to charities – I tell charities to be realistic about what they are able to achieve – you can't achieve the same on less money and funders need to be supportive of this.

As funders, check in with grantees and agree if needed to amend funding so they can use some of the funding to cover additional NIC costs, even if it means shortening the length of the activity that would be funded.

As funders, you won't get feedback on how good you are from the people you fund as they're a) grateful and b) desperate. Funders need to look at how they can assess how they're doing – assume you're getting it wrong, decide how you want it to do and action it.

This government's communication is really poor. (e.g. winter fuel allowance). Challenge everything that's thrown at you and where it's coming from – question everything you think you know about the sector, who you fund, what you hear.

Spending review – some good social policy changes and also an increase to the Charity Commission budget. New chief exec of Charity Commission (David Holdsworth) formally of Animal and Plant Health Agency – will be a positive force and starts from a good place.

We need to be aware that the sector tends to self-censor (through fear). My call to arms is that you have a voice, people listen to you (especially LAs and governments) – your voices are powerful. Don't be mute – you know what's happening in your area and you see across the piece (the connections). Collaboration is so important. You can facilitate solutions.

Have the headspace to look at why charities are there – what's the source of the problem? Look upstream and collaborate – be transformational rather than transactional. Take time to debate, argue and share – come together without an agenda – to talk about what's happening in Yorkshire in general.

Always think about whether your actions are transactional or transformational.

A lot of the people we're helping – it's not immediately apparent what the impact of the support is. (e.g. Surestart had a huge impact – but that is only apparent 20 years on). Just get the charity to be clear on the actions they are taking for long-term results.

There should be no such things as core costs – it's essential resource and you cannot run your charity without it.

Funders are under so much pressure as everybody is turning to you in the current climate – you only contribute about 10% of funds. You cannot subsidise the state, so don't try to – try to work in partnership as well. Do not subsidise the state – the state will then think they don't have to put the money in.

Trust charities to know what they are doing – they are passionate about the communities and causes they service.

The government is saying they want to incentivise philanthropy – do you know how to do this and if so can you share that knowledge and information with the government?

We cannot compromise our principles – do not keep quiet. Speak up and say what you see – if you are trying to effect change you need to say so. "This is not OK" "This is not going to work" – don't be nice to people because you've been told that you need to.